

# Why and How People Change Health Behaviors

## Introduction

Why and How People Change Health Behaviors presents stories from individuals who have made successful lifestyle behavior changes and maintained them for a significant period of time. The intention of the book is three-fold: 1) to help those who have not yet made positive behavior changes by providing motivation and insight, 2) to assist those who are currently attempting a lifestyle change, and 3) to serve as a source of hope and support for those who have tried and have experienced failures in the past.

The evidence continues to mount that health behaviors have perhaps the single greatest influence on our health, and thus ultimately our lives. Most people who are not practicing healthy behaviors know they should change, but don't exactly know how. A significant amount of research has been conducted on behavior change theory and various models for behavior change have been developed. These models attempt to account for psychological, social, structural, and other important factors that predict behavior. In spite of this body of work, still nearly 67 percent of American adults are overweight or obese, 60 percent don't exercise, and surprising as it may be, still more than 20 percent smoke. **Why can't we change?**

In trying to answer this rhetorical question, we decided to take off our hats as scientists, researchers, and health promoters, and just ask common people who had made and continued their positive health behavior changes to tell us how they did it. This book tells their stories.

## How the Stories were Compiled

We reached out through various channels to find individuals who had made successful lifestyle changes and who had been able to sustain them for some time. People with diverse backgrounds and from various locations around the United States were identified. Originally, written surveys were administered. However, as the surveys were reviewed it became evident they did not capture the whole story, and did not allow the personal elements of each participant's behavior change journey to come through. As a result, the survey was re-structured and administered through a recorded personal interview (see Appendix A for the interview guide). This new approach allowed participants to tell their stories from their own points of view, in a way that is interesting for others to read, and that is motivational and compelling.

## Some of the Findings

In this book you will hear from people like Maureen G., who started on her journey by taking one walk with a fellow parent at a little league practice. **(Note that only the initial of the last name of the participants are used in the book to protect their privacy. In some cases the entire name has been changed at their request).** Another story from Tina V. tells how a photo changed her life. People like Larry P. point out inspiration they received from a support group, while others like Gerry R.B., Jose V., and Tim D. made changes by joining programs at their workplaces. E. Dewey S., a 76 year old man who overcame several unhealthy lifestyle habits now enjoys his retirement and looks forward to daily workouts.

As the stories were told some common themes emerged. These were things that many of the participants agreed had worked. The ideas for successfully making behavior changes that the participants told us about included:

- Do what works for you — everyone changes differently.

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- Be well informed about the change you are making — Be ready to outsmart the behavior in your efforts to overcome it.
- Be ready — Like anything else, don't go into the effort unprepared or lacking confidence.
- Set goals — Setting measurable goals provides a “yardstick” against which to chart progress and affirms your commitment to achievement.
- Make a total commitment — While different people moved into their changes with differing amounts of speed and energy, all were totally committed on some level when the change finally began to occur.
- Take it one day at a time — Seeing a change as something you are going to have to do for the **rest of your life** is overwhelming. Seeing the change as a series of day-by-day steps makes it easier to accept and comprehend. Most changers expressed that as the days went by, the mental pressures of changing the behavior became easier. In fact, most said their past success resulted in additional confidence and motivation to continue the journey.
- Plan ahead for scenarios that you find threatening — The changers in this book often spoke of the pitfalls they faced. Thinking of what those threatening situations might be in advance, and having a plan to deal with them, helped many of the changers.
- Control your environment — Many changers said that doing things like not going places where temptation could occur, getting rid of the clothes they wore when they were heavier, making their house or office a non-smoking area, or keeping only healthy food in their pantries and refrigerators helped.
- Take small steps — Most changers realized they did not get to their current situations overnight. Thus, they realized that returning to a

more healthy state would take time. For most participants, big changes occurred through a series of small victories.

- Seek support from others — Family members, co-workers, support groups, workplace health promotion programs, and other means of support were all helpful. If you have the support readily available to you, use it! If you do not, find ways to add support to your life.
- Realize that compliments from others are motivating — Many changers mentioned how motivational and energizing compliments were.
- Don't let a short term relapse negatively impact your potential for long term success — Very few of the participants made their changes without some amount of relapse. The difference was that successful changers recognized the mistake that led to relapse, didn't dwell on it, dusted themselves off, and got back on the horse and rode on.
- Know that one successful change leads to another — Success drives success.
- Reward yourself for success — Successful changers took pride in what they accomplished, and gave themselves little rewards along the way. Making one small change, can lead to success.

As you read the book you will find many more tips and ideas. These are but some of the recurring themes.

### How You Might Use This Book

There are 44 stories to read, each one equally remarkable in its own way. While reading these stories, if you are someone thinking about a lifestyle change, you may find someone like yourself whom you can model after. Other readers may choose to select good ideas from several stories and mold their own plan. Still others may just need to know it can be done, and use all the stories to help them start experiencing success.

One way to get more out of this book is to ask yourself the questions on the following page as you read each story. You could also use these questions as a guide for discussion with your book club, worksite or community support group, family or friends. While all questions may not apply to each story, we provide this complete listing in the introduction because we have learned that each story can be interpreted differently by each reader.

We want these questions to serve as a source of reflection as you prepare yourself or someone else for successfully changing a behavior. If you want to actually record your reactions to some of the stories as these questions provoke thought, a form on which to do so is presented in Appendix B. Note that if you want to keep this form on your personal computer or your Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), go to **[www.healthimprovementsolutions.com](http://www.healthimprovementsolutions.com)**, click on the “Resources” link, click Why and How People Change Health Behaviors, and then click on “Behavior Change Planning Log”, to download the log presented in Appendix B.

Here are the questions we suggest you ask yourself as you read each story:

## **How This Story Relates to Me**

1. What do I think are the most motivational aspects from this story for me?
2. Can I derive any motivation from this story for my own situation?
3. Do I have some things in common with this changer?
4. What was the most interesting part of this story for me?
5. What was the most surprising part of this story for me?
6. Is this story a good model for me in establishing personal goals?
7. What are my similarities and differences with this changer?

## **My Key Learning Points**

1. What are the key learning points from this story for me?
2. During what part of the story did I feel like the changer finally made the total commitment necessary to make behavior change(s) and what can I learn from this?
3. Do I see the importance of taking small steps that lead to lasting change from this story?
4. Did this story help me put relapse and overcoming it into perspective?
5. Changing two behaviors at once can be too difficult. What did I learn by hearing how this person addressed and successfully changed more than one behavior?
6. Does this story help me understand the importance of rewards?
7. What are the main tips and strategies that I learned from this story?

## **My Action Steps**

1. What was this changers support structure? How will I develop a support structure for making my behavior changes?

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2. What did I learn by reading about this person's planning behaviors and what is my plan for change?
3. What environmental changes did this changer make and what environmental changes will I need to make to be successful?
4. What are some small steps I can take now that will help me reach lasting behavior change?
5. How might I reward myself for making a successful behavior change?
6. Am I prepared for relapse and how will I deal with it if it does occur?

The paths to successful behavior change seem to vary as widely as the people whose stories are told in this book. You will read stories from people living all over the country ranging from 23-76 years of age. The stories are told in *their* words. Some chose to tell us a lot while others got right to the point and told their stories quickly. Regardless how the stories were told, there are many lessons to be learned from these successful changers. Wherever you are at, we hope this book creates a launching pad for your successful change.

### **Keeping the Book in Context**

Why and How People Change Health Behaviors is not a research study. While we used health experts to review the concept, the interview guide, and to make recommendations on whom to interview, this book should not be viewed as research or an endorsement of any of the products or programs mentioned in the stories. The mention of specific products or programs simply demonstrates the variety of solutions people have used to help them be successful. So that you know where to find any products and programs mentioned in this book, we have provided contact information for each in the Appendices.

## The Role of Personality

Initially, when putting the concept and book together, we wondered what role personality played in making lifestyle behavior changes. As you will see from the interview guide in Appendix A and in the stories, we asked respondents to note the personality type that seemed to fit them best. We sent the interview guide to all respondents prior to the interviews so they could prepare if desired. We also shared a brief description of the personality types. We chose both flattering and unflattering terms to describe the personality types using the Enneagram personality inventory. For more information regarding the Enneagram personality inventory visit: [www.enneagraminstitute.com](http://www.enneagraminstitute.com).

In the stories you will read responses to personality types and quickly discover that, like their methods, the personality types of the successful changers varied widely. This led us to believe that no specific personality type is required to be successful at making a behavior change. Again, while this book does not provide conclusive research, **it does suggest that people of all ages and genders, representing a variety of personality types, use multiple methods to successfully make behavior changes.**

## The Road to Healthy Behavior Change

The road to behavior change is not easily traveled, but it has been successfully navigated by many people. We sincerely hope individuals who read this book become motivated to make positive behavior changes. We would like to identify more of you and learn about why and how you changed. **If you or someone you know is willing to tell us your story, please e-mail us at [joe@healthimprovementsolutions.com](mailto:joe@healthimprovementsolutions.com).** Please put “Why and How...Success Story” in the subject line. We want to hear about the experiences of people old and young (even adolescents), both men and women, from all walks of life, and potentially use your story in



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our future edition. Your story would be greatly appreciated, and you will be helping others discover why and how to make healthy behavior changes.

We hope you will enjoy this book. If you are someone attempting a behavior change we wish you success and hope this book will serve as a source of inspiration for you.

**Maureen G.**

37-Year-Old Female

Hartford, CT/Ellington, CT

Weight Loss

Increased Physical Activity

Overcoming Depression

My name is Maureen G. I was born in Hartford, Connecticut the middle child of seven children in an Irish Catholic family. I am 37 year old, single parent, currently living in Ellington, Connecticut.

The behaviors associated with eating were instilled in me very early in life. For example, the food selections we had as children tended to be very bland, and high in starch and sugar. My mother tried to prepare healthy “balanced” meals for us, but by today’s standards they really were neither healthy nor balanced. I did not learn about healthy eating until much later in life. Growing up, we were expected to finish everything on our plates. There was an expectation to enjoy what you had that day, because we did not always know what we would be having the next day. I remember sneaking and hiding food as a child. My mother would hide food from us, because my siblings and I would raid the cupboards.

When I started thinking about changing this behavior, there were a number of factors I considered. I was always a bit heavier — I have four sisters and two brothers, and I was always one of the heavier siblings. I had been overweight by 20-30 pounds when I was in my teens and early 20’s. In high school, I would avoid taking photographs. I did not want to see what I looked like. Then, as a young, single parent, I experienced years of depression and uncertainty. I focused on anything other than myself. When I was 34, I became very concerned about a variety of things — one

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being my emotional health. I was unhappy and knew I was not healthy. I couldn't get from my car to my desk at work without becoming winded. I was in denial and not focusing on my health. I devoted time toward raising my son and ensuring I had a good job to support him. Finally, at age 34, I said, "I am unhappy and depressed, and I need to admit it."

My workplace offered various health services designed to assist employees. An employee health newsletter listed the risk factors for diabetes, such as being overweight or having a family history. I recall thinking, "I am a coronary event waiting to happen." I felt like I was one big risk factor. I had purchased various workout videos, but I was so overweight that I physically couldn't use them. I was also one of those foolish people who would begin an exercise program without consulting my doctor.

I began changing my behavior while my son was playing little league baseball, which bored me to tears. I would sit there and think that there had to be a million other things I could be doing. One day as I was starting to fall asleep, one of the other mothers asked if I wanted to go for a walk around the park. During our walk, she told wonderfully humorous stories about herself and her family. She also shared something that made an impression on me. She said, "If you can do something continually for 30 days, you can make or break a habit."

I am a very private person, and I was very self-conscious about my weight. Going to a fitness center and being around fitness people was not what I wanted. That is why the idea of walking around my neighborhood was so appealing. I ended up walking each morning before my son awoke. I started out walking 15 minutes, then 20 minutes, and gradually my pace became faster. I became curious as to how far I was going, so I drove my car one day to measure the distance. It was only three-tenths of a mile. I then figured a mile took me 20 minutes to complete. I started thinking, "I can do more than a mile, I can do two miles." I got to the point where I

was walking four to six miles a day, and completing a mile in about fifteen minutes. It became addictive. Walking turned out to be the perfect thing for me because it required no equipment. I did find out that good comfortable shoes are very important. Now I always have a back-up pair. At one point I was walking about 15 miles a day. During that time, I would walk in the morning and later in the day when I needed a de-stressor. It has continued to be something that helps to relieve some of the stresses of work and family.

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In 18 months, I ended up losing between 80-90 pounds. I also changed my eating habits. **I feel my eating habits changed because of the walking. I began to crave healthier food and shun unhealthy foods.** I used to eat a whole package of Oreo's in one night. As a child I recalled my mother having to hide food at our house. I still find it challenging to overcome that thinking. The best strategy for me is to eat five-six small meals throughout the day to ensure I am getting a balanced diet. Now I am at the point where I could probably lose about 10 more pounds, but I feel healthy. I modified my diet significantly because I knew it was important if I were to maintain my progress.

Recently I began to change the types of workout routines I do. Sometimes I do Pilates in the morning. If I get bored with something, I try something else for awhile. Right now my routine includes 20 minutes of Pilates in the morning, a walk of four-six miles and Tae-Bo. Other than food changes, I also needed to get a second job to accommodate my changing wardrobe needs. I never used to like buying clothes. Now, when

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I want something new I can wear it (laughs). I can now shop at stores where I couldn't shop before!

Barriers — there were barriers, such as watching out for other people's opinions. I found that some people had a negative attitude toward weight loss. People would say things like, "When are you going to stop walking?" I would look at them and respond, "Why would I stop walking?" This is a behavior change in my life and the wonderful side effect is that I lost weight. I also found that it has changed my attitude. I find that I have a sense of humor, and now my general outlook on life is positive.

There has never been a period of more than two days that I haven't walked. I started a group walking club. At work, they had a program called Walking Well. You simply report your walking activity each week. There were incentives and prizes, so I filled out forms and walked three to six miles a day. I received emails from the program coordinators who were in disbelief and asking, "Are you sure you are not sending in too many forms?" My employer featured me in an article in Working Well magazine. In the article, I shared, "Anyone can accomplish this type of success if they want to. But you can't do it for anybody but yourself. You have to want it for yourself."

**During my change attempt there were those people who were supportive. My son took such pride in the changes that were happening in my life. I remember one time in particular, I had picked him up from daycare. As we left, he put his arm around me. I thought it was unusual, and he shared that one of his playmates had said to him, "Wow — your mom looks different. She looks like she is losing a lot of weight." He took so much pride in the fact that other kids had noticed.**

During my behavior change I did not get help from a health professional.

I did read, but it did not energize me. I think a book — such as this one — that highlights health behavior success stories, would have piqued my interest.

My weight was not an issue, my physician and I discussed. I never felt comfortable or that it was a topic my doctor could help me with. Years ago, an overweight physician made a comment about my weight. I did not feel like it was something he knew anything about or could help me with.

When I think about whether I was prepared for this change, I look back and think that I was clueless. During the first year I may have been walking too much on some days, and damaging my feet and knees; walking to the point where I would get blisters or bruise the bottom of my feet from the constant pounding of walking. I didn't care.

I think I will always stay with this lifestyle change, but it will always be a struggle. I recognize that I have to be vigilant because the ease with which I can go back to poor habits, and allow myself to fall back into my old lifestyle, is very strong. It is a struggle to stay focused. It is work to make yourself happy. It's not something that just gets handed to you — you work for it. It is also not something where you say, "Now that I am here, I have reached my goal and can relax." People say you have to make sacrifices (laughs). I am sacrificing my time, or things that I need to get done. But, if you don't change your health behavior you may also be sacrificing the length of your life.

The advice I would have for others is to do something you truly enjoy, and ensure it is something you can sustain. Whatever you choose to do, especially when it comes to managing your health, it has to be sustainable and not something you can just buy into for the short term. It is something you have to make a part of your life. Also, be sure you are doing it for yourself and not for others. If you do it for yourself, then others will benefit. Take some time for yourself every day. It is so important to find

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people who can support you. I have a friend who has health difficulties and is very overweight, yet she has been one of my best supporters. She is so happy for me that she told her psychologist that I was her inspiration. I thanked her for mentioning me at the session and then asked her if she could also mention me in a group session (Laughs). Everybody gets to their goals differently. What I did, and continue to do for my health behavior change, is not necessarily what will work for everyone. You need to do what will work best for you — it has to be personal and have a positive impact for your life. **When I awake each morning, I say to myself, “It is time to take care of yourself.”**